

Update to Parliament on self-isolation rules

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on COVID-19 and our progress down our roadmap to freedom.

Freedom is in our sights once again, thanks to the protective wall of this country's vaccination programme and the huge advances we've made in getting this virus under control.

Yesterday, I stood at this Despatch Box and set out the details of what Step 4 in our roadmap will mean for this nation.

After the arduous 18 months that we've all endured, it was so wonderful to describe a world where we no longer have to count the number of people we're meeting, where theatres and stadiums are bustling with people once again and where care home residents are able to see loved ones without restrictions.

I understand that some people are cautious about the idea of easing restrictions. But we must balance the risks.

The risks of a virus that has diminished, but not defeated, against the risks of keeping these restrictions, and the health, social and economic hardship that we know they bring.

This pandemic is far from over, and we'll continue with caution. But we're increasingly confident that our plan is working, and that we can soon begin a new chapter based on the foundations of personal responsibility and common sense rather than the blunt instrument of rules and regulations.

Today, Mr Speaker, I'd like to provide an update on another area where we're able to ease restrictions: the rules on self-isolation.

Self-isolation has played a critical role in helping us to get this virus under control, by denying the virus the human contact that it needs to spread. And I'm so grateful to the many, many people all across the UK, who have selflessly done their duty, making sacrifices so we can keep the virus at bay.

Even though we've done everything in our power to support the people who've had to self-isolate and yesterday we announced we'll be extending our financial support until September I'm fully aware of how difficult it's been. And that it's meant people missing out on precious moments and spending time apart from loved ones.

But we can take hope from the fact that science has shown us a solution, just as it's done so many times throughout our fight against this virus.

And that solution is our vaccine, which we know offers huge protection.

The latest data from PHE shows that our vaccination programme has saved over 27,000 lives and has prevented over 7 million people from getting COVID-19 and it shows that both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine can reduce symptomatic infection by almost 80 per cent.

This protective wall, because that's what it is, means the odds have shifted in our favour, and we can look afresh at many of the measures that we've had to put in place.

This is especially important when almost two thirds of adults – 64 per cent – have had both doses of a vaccine, and so have got the maximum protection on offer.

As a result, we will soon be able to take a risk-based approach, that recognises the huge benefits that vaccines provide, both to the people who get the jab and to their loved ones too.

So, from the 16th of August, when even more people will have the protection of both doses and when modelling suggests the risk from the virus will be lower, anyone who's a close contact of a positive case will no longer have to self-isolate, if they've been fully vaccinated.

If someone gets their second dose just before, or after, the 16th of August, they'll need to wait until two weeks after they get the second jab to benefit from these new freedoms so the vaccine has time to build the maximum possible protection.

As we make this change, we'll be drawing on the huge capacity we've built for testing and sequencing, and advising close contacts who are fully vaccinated to take a PCR test as soon as possible so they can get certainty about their condition.

Of course, anyone who tests positive will have to self-isolate, whether they've had the jab or not.

This new approach means we can manage the virus in a way that's proportionate to the pandemic, while maintaining the freedoms that are so important to us all.

As Honourable Members will be aware, we're not currently offering vaccines to most people under the age of 18. So, we've thought carefully about how we can make sure young people get the life experiences that are so important to their development while at the same time keeping them safe from this deadly virus.

In line with the approach for adults, anyone under the age of 18, who is a close contact of a positive case, will no longer need to self-isolate.

Instead, they'll be given advice about whether they should get tested, dependent on their age, and they'll need to self-isolate if they test positive.

These measures will also come into force on the 16th August, ahead of the

Autumn school term.

I know that people will have questions about what these changes, and Step 4 of our roadmap, means for schools and colleges and my Right Honourable Friend, the Education Secretary, will be updating the House immediately after my statement.

We're also looking at the self-isolation rules for international arrivals so we can remove the need for full vaccinated individuals to isolate when they return from amber list countries and the Transport Secretary will update the House later this week.

Mr Speaker, step-by-step, and jab-by-jab, we're replacing the temporary protection of the restrictions with the long-term protection of a vaccine.

So we can restore the freedoms that we cherish, and the experiences that mean so much to us all.

Let's all play our part, to protect ourselves and to protect others, as we enter these crucial few weeks. So that in this battle between the vaccine and the virus, the vaccine will prevail.

I commend this statement to the House.